

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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cultural undertaking on a continent where political walls now topple almost daily. Just seeing people disposing of so much income is miraculous proof of a valid economic system.

Who knows what Disney may unleash by this economic phenomenon in the the French countryside? Now that Paul Goldberger of the *New York Times* has equated the Disney Corporation with Cummins Engine, Johnson Wax and IBM as a patron of “big-time architecture” and found the results add an “intellectual and aesthetic challenge” to the Disney experience, why won’t France find this aggressively American, high-brow/low-brow mix a destination must?

Besides, whatever the new-found alliance between Disney and architecture, how could the French sneer at having a good time?

“M-I-C! K-E-Y! M-O-U-S-E...!”

—Hugh Hardy

## TEACHING TIMES SQUARE A LESSON

New York—Times Square is the heart of New York’s glamorous theater district but it is also rife with prostitution, drugs, poverty and, in recent years, vacant theaters. Recently one long-vacant theater re-opened to tell the story of its history and to teach a lesson about how to revitalize cities.

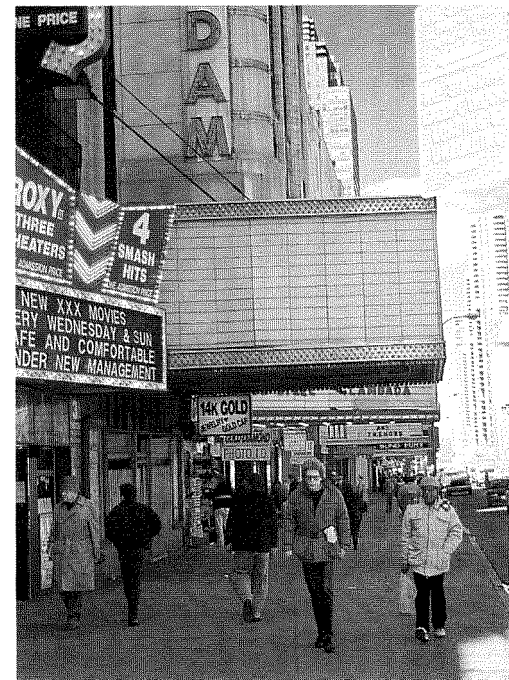
Since the early 1980s, the state-chartered 42nd Street Redevelopment Corporation has been advancing plans to improve the area by replacing the T-shirt and electronics stores, fast-food stands, video arcades and peep shows with prime office and retail space. Several apartment hotels and a block of mostly low-rise office and loft buildings would be replaced with skyscrapers. Just this April, the state finally succeeded in condemning the property it needs.

Theories abound as to the reason for delay: politics, bureaucratic red tape, Manhattan’s overbuilt commercial real estate market. Whatever the reason, the area has been in limbo: Property owners, uncertain how redevelopment will affect their holdings, have been hesitant to invest in new projects or even routine maintenance. One result is that six of nine historic theaters in the redevelopment area have closed.

Last fall, frustrated with the uncertainty, the Durst Organization, a real estate development and management company with interests in a number of properties near the redevelopment site, acquired long-term leases for eight 42nd Street theaters and began refurbishing them. This winter the company donated the use of one theater, the Victory, for the staging of *Crowbar*.

*Crowbar*, the first theatrical production at the Victory in 60 years, draws New Yorkers to an easily overlooked building in a frequently avoided neighborhood. The play, populated by ghosts of the theater’s former owners, performers and audiences, explores the history of this once-filled house. The unrenovated interior aptly functions as the set: The audience sits in the stage area and the actors parade among the seats, up and down the aisles and across the balconies of the empty house. Images of the changing façade evoke the spirit and mystery of the theater’s 90-year history.

*Crowbar* is the latest “site-specific” production from En Garde Arts, a company that describes its work as emerging from “an appreciation of the spatial possibilities, historic traditions



The block of 42nd Street that would be redeveloped.

and artistic resonances of distinctive sites.” Inspired by unusual New York City locations, Anne Hamburger, En Garde’s founder and producer, commissions playwrights, composers and directors to create works that interact with and cast new meaning on the places where they are performed. Previous pieces have been staged in Central Park, in guest rooms at the Chelsea Hotel and in various windows of a building in Tribeca.

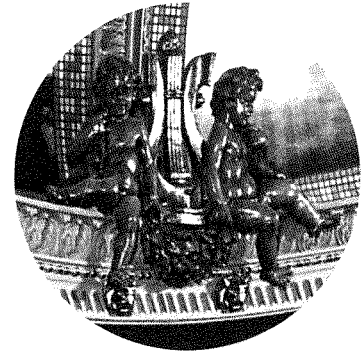
The well-attended production of *Crowbar* (its limited engagement has become an open-ended run) demonstrates the Dursts’ point that the area would do just fine without the redevelopment plan. In fact, since 1984, private developers have started at least 10 major hotel, office and retail projects in the blocks just north of the redevelopment site. (Most were aided by tax or zoning breaks.) By opening the Victory and planning movie theaters and nightclubs for their seven other 42nd Street theaters, the Dursts hope to show that renewal is possible without government intervention.

Efforts to revitalize Times Square could take a cue from the success of *Crowbar*, which celebrates Times

Square’s role as a place for arts and entertainment. The redevelopment project does call for preserving the landmark theaters, but at the cost of surrounding them with 50-story office buildings. This will change the physical character of Times Square and threaten its role as a theater district.

Times Square’s spirit is embodied in its buildings but is lived on its streets, screens and stages. A player in *Crowbar* describes the Victory Theater in the early part of the century as a “wild, outlandish place.” This wildness is characteristic of entertainment districts, and has long been the nature of 42nd Street. Perhaps it’s time to consider how New York could build upon, rather than destroy, this tradition.

—Andrew Mandel & Jacqueline Thaw



Detail of theater interior.  
Courtesy the Museum of the City of New York.



The facade of the Victory Theater at the turn of the century and today.  
Left photo courtesy the Museum of the City of New York.